

A Misleading Answer

A contemporary of mine inquired about how he should act during these times of persecution,¹ in which he is forced to acknowledge "that man"² [Mohammed] as God's messenger and a true prophet. He directed his question at someone whom he calls a sage and who [himself] was not affected by the persecutions that wreaked havoc on many of the Jewish communities, may Hashem end them soon. He asked whether he should make the confession in order to save his life; and that he be able to raise his children so that they will not be lost among the gentiles. Or does the Torah of Moshe demand that he die and not accept their creed. We must also take into consideration that this confession may eventually cause him to abandon the observance of all the mitzvos.

The man whom he asked his question gave a weak and pointless answer, a reply that was repulsive both in meaning and language. He made statements that are utterly meaningless, as even unlearned women can realize.

Although his reply is long-winded, weak, and tedious, I thought I would respond to his every point. However, I took pity on the gift Hashem bestowed on us, by that I mean [the power of] speech, as it says in the Torah, "*Who gives man speech? . . . Is it not I, Hashem?*" One should use words more sparingly than money. Indeed, the Wise Man (Shlomoh) has denounced [people who] talk much and say things of little substance, stating, "*Just as dreams come with much brooding, so does a fool's voice come with much speech*" (Koheles 5:2). In the same way, you see what Iyov's friends said

¹The Almohads, a fanatical Moslem sect that rose to power in Morocco and Spain (1130-1223), forced the Jewish population of these regions to choose between Islam and exile.

²The Rambam is very reluctant to mention the name of the founder of Islam. Here he uses the term *oso ish*, "that man," the same expression used in referring to the founder of Christianity. In Iggeres Teiman he uses the appellation *hameshuga* – the madman, instead of *oso ish*.

when he talked on and on, *"Is a multitude of words unanswerable? Must a talkative person be right?"* (Iyov 11:2), *"Iyov does not speak with knowledge; his words lack understanding"* (Iyov 34:35). Many other examples can be cited.

Since I am thoroughly familiar with this situation,³ and I do not want to burden you with the ignorance of this man, I think it is worthwhile to mention the thrust of what he said and omit that which does not deserve an answer. Although, on reflection, nothing he said is worthy of a reply.

He states at the outset that whoever acknowledges that [Mohammed] is a [divine] messenger has thereby automatically renounced his belief in Hashem, the God of Yisrael. He proves his assertion by citing the saying of our Sages, *"Whoever acknowledges idolatry is considered as if he denied the entire Torah"* (Nedarim 28a). In making this analogy, he does not differentiate between a person who voluntarily accepts idolatry, like Yеровam and his clique, and one who says under duress that someone is a prophet, because he fears death by the sword.

When I read this first statement of his, I said to myself, *"It is not right for me to attack him before reading all he has to say, in compliance with the words of Shlomoh, 'To answer a man before hearing him out is foolish and disgraceful'"* (Koheles 18:13).

When I scanned his words a bit more, I noticed that he said the following, *"Whoever makes this confession is a gentile, even if he observes the entire Torah privately and publicly."* Evidently, this "intelligent" individual [who does not differentiate between one who confessed voluntarily and one who confessed under duress] sees no difference between a person who does not observe Shabbos because he is afraid of the sword and one who does not observe it because he does not want to.

Then I read, *"If one of the forced converts enters one of their houses of worship, even if he does not utter a word, and then goes home and says his prayer there, this prayer counts as an added sin and transgression."* He brings proof from the comments of our Sages on the verse, *"For My people have done a twofold wrong"* (Yirmiyah 2:13) [which the Sages explain to mean] *"they bowed to the idol and then bowed to the Beis*

³When the Rambam was 13 years old, his father and the entire family fled Cordova after the city fell to the Almohads. They wandered from place to place for about twelve years, until they settled in Cairo, in 1165.

Hamikdash" (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:6). This [would-be] "Bible commentator" makes no distinction between a heretic who willingly bowed to an idol and then in order to defile the *Bais Hamikdash* bowed to it, and one who enters a mosque under duress, pretends to promote the magnificence of their God, and does not utter a single word opposed to our religion.

Likewise, he said that "Whoever acknowledges that this man [Mohammed] is a prophet, although compelled to do so, is a wicked person and is disqualified by the Torah from serving as a witness, as it says, *"Do not join forces with a wicked person to be a corrupt witness"* (Shemos 23:1), [which the Talmud expounds to mean], *"do not make a wicked man a witness"* (Bava Kamma 72b).

Even as I read his blasphemous insults and his inane and foolish long-winded chatter, I said to myself, it still is not right to criticize him before I read the rest of his writing. It might be as Shlomoh said, *"The end of a matter is better than the beginning of it"* (Koheles 7:8).

However the end of his discourse says "Even heretics and Christians would choose death rather than acknowledge that [Mohammed] has divine mission." When I read this I was utterly shocked and amazed. I wondered, *"Is there no God in Yisrael"* (Melachim II 1,3). ["Do the Jewish people lack their own laws? Can we derive the proper way to act from the gentiles?"] If an idol worshiper burns his son or his daughter to his idol, should we say that we too should set ourselves on fire in the service of Hashem? Woe for such a question, and woe for the answer!

Seeing that he started out by bringing proofs for his arguments that had no bearing on the subject and ended up by approving the views of heretics and Christians, I thought it appropriate to apply this verse to him, *"His talk begins as silliness and ends as disastrous madness"* (Koheles 10:13).

No one has the right to speak and deliver sermons in public before he has gone over his speech two, three, and four times and then reviewed it thoroughly. The Sages derived this from Scriptural verse, *"Then He saw it and gauged it; He measured it and probed it."* And afterward, *"He said to man"* (Iyov 28:27). This is what a person needs to do before he speaks. But the things a person writes down with his own hand and inscribes in a book, he should review a thousand times, if possible. This man did nothing of the kind. He recorded all these important ideas in a document, but did not prepare a first

draft or edit it. He considered his statements beyond doubt. They did not need to be checked. He handed them to someone who brought them to every city and province. He brought darkness into the hearts of the people, as it says *"He sent darkness, and it was very dark"* (Tehillim 105:28).

The Gravity of Maligning a Jew

I will now begin to outline the magnitude of the error that this poor creature committed, and the [damage] he caused through his ignorance. He meant to do good, but instead he caused harm [by making statements] that are not substantiated. His long, drawn out prose demonstrates self-love of his own style of writing.

It is well known from the commentaries of our Sages that in Moshe's time, before the Exodus, the people of Yisrael had gone astray and broken the covenant of *bris milah*. None except for the tribe of Levi, were circumcised (*Shemos Rabbah* 19:6). [This situation prevailed] until the mitzvah of *Pesach* was announced. Hashem said to Moseh "No uncircumcised may eat it" (*Shemos* 12:43). He then told them to perform the *milah*—circumcision. Our Rabbis give an account of the procedure: Moshe did the circumcision, Yehoshua performed the *periah*, and Aharon did the *metzitzah*.¹ Then they piled the foreskins in heaps. The blood of *milah* became mixed with the blood of the *korban Pesach* (the paschal lamb), and this made them worthy to be redeemed. This is the meaning of Hashem's message to *Yechezkel*, "When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you, 'Live by your blood;' yea, I said to you, 'Live by your blood'" (*Yechezkel* 16:6). Our Sages remark that [the Jewish people] had become debased with incest, as it is described [in the chapter² that begins with] "Once there were two women, daughters of one mother" (*Yechezkel* 23:2).

Although they were perverted to such an extent, when Moshe said, "But they will not believe me" (*Shemos* 4:1), Hashem admonishes him saying, "Moshe, they are believers, children of believers; believers, for it says, 'and the people believed' (*Shemos* 14:31); sons of

¹*periah*—revealing the corona and *metzitzah*—sucking the blood are essential parts of the *milah*.

²In this chapter, *Yechezkel* describes in detail the depraved conduct of the kingdoms of Yehudah and Yisrael.

believers, for it says, *'He [Avraham] believed in Hashem, and He counted it as righteousness'* (Bereishis 15:6). But you [Moshe] will end up not believing, as it says, *'You did not have enough faith in Me to sanctify Me'*" (Bamidbar 20:12). As a matter of fact, [Moshe] was punished immediately, as the Rabbis expounded, "He who suspects the innocent is punished physically. From where is this derived? From Moshe."³

In the same vein, in Eliyahu's days, they all willfully worshiped idols, except for *"the seven thousand—every knee that has not knelt to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him"* (Melachim I 19:18). Nevertheless, when [Eliyahu] accused Yisrael at Chorev, he was taken to task for it, as can be gathered from the verse, *"[Hashem said to him], 'Why are you here Eliyahu?' He replied, 'I am moved by zeal for Hashem, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life'"* (Melachim I 19:9, 10).

[The Sages interpret this verse as a dialogue between Hashem and Eliyahu. Eliyahu: They have forsaken Your covenant.]

HASHEM: Is it your covenant by any chance?

ELIYAHU: They also tore down Your altars.

HASHEM: Were they your altars perhaps?

ELIYAHU: They put Your prophets to the sword.

HASHEM: But you are still alive!

ELIYAHU: I alone am left, and they are out to take my life.

HASHEM: Instead of accusing Yisrael, shouldn't you rather denounce the gentile nations? They maintain a house of debauchery, a house of idol worship, and you indict Yisrael! *"Forsake the cities of Aroer"* (Yeshayah 17:2). *"Go back by the way you came, and on to the wilderness of Damascus"* (Melachim I 19:15). This is all explained by the Rabbis in Midrash Chazisa (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:6).

Likewise, in Yeshayah's days, the Jewish people were deeply steeped in sin, as it says, *"Ah, sinful nation! People laden with iniquity!"* (Yeshayah 1:4). They worshiped idols, as it says, *"Behind the door and doorpost you have directed your thoughts"* (Yeshayah 57:8). There were also murderers among them, as it says, *"Alas, she has become a harlot, the faithful city that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt—"*

³The Torah relates that immediately after Moshe made this comment, his hand was struck with leprosy.

but now murderers" (Yeshayah 1:21). They also desecrated God's Name, saying, *"Eat and drink for tomorrow we shall die"* (Yeshayah 22:13). They treated Hashem's mitzvos with contempt, saying, *"Leave the way! Get off the path! Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Yisrael"* (Yeshayah 30:11).

In spite of all this, when Yeshayah said *"And I live among a people of unclean lips,"* he was punished immediately, as it says *"one of the seraphs flew over to me with a live coal . . . He touched it to my lips and declared, 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt shall depart and your sin purged away'"* (Yeshayah 6:5-7). According to the Sages, his sin was not forgiven until Menashe killed him (Sanhedrin 103b).

When the angel appeared and pleaded unfavorably against Yehoshua the son of Yehotzadak because his sons had married women who were unsuitable to be the wives of priests, Hashem distanced himself from the angel as it is written, *"Hashem rebuke you, O Satan, may Hashem Who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! For this is a brand plucked from the fire"* (Zechariah 3:2).

This is the kind of punishment that has been meted out to the pillars of the world—Moshe, Eliyahu, Yeshayah, and the ministering angels—for speaking just a few disparaging words about the Jewish people. You can imagine [what will happen to] the least among the lowly if he unleashes his tongue and speaks out against Jewish communities, rabbis and their students, priests and Levites, calling them sinners, evildoers, disqualified to testify as witnesses, and heretics who deny Hashem the God of Yisrael. Remember, the writer recorded these [slanderous remarks] in his own handwriting! Just think what his punishment will be! [The forced converts] did not rebel against God to seek pleasure and enjoyment. They did not abandon the Jewish religion to attain status and mundane delights. *"For they have fled before swords, before the whetted sword, before the bow that was drawn, before the stress of war"* (Yeshayah 21:15). This man did not realize that these were not willful transgressors. Hashem will not abandon or forsake them, *"for he did not scorn, He did not spurn the plea of the poor"* (Tehillim 22:25). Concerning such people the Torah says, *"[Yitzchak] smelled the fragrance of his (Yaakov's) clothes"* (Bereishis 27:27). Said the Sages, *"Instead of reading begadav (his clothes), read bogdav⁴ (those that deceive him)"* [Bereishis Rabbah 65].

⁴The word *begadav* (his clothes) has the same letters as *bogdav* (his deception); and the verse ends *"and he (Yitzchak) blessed him."* The

Whatever this man said are things he dreamed up. During one of the persecutions in which the great rabbis were killed, Rabbi Meir was arrested. People who knew him said, "You are Meir, aren't you?" and he replied, "No, I am not." Pointing at the meat of a pig they ordered, "Eat this if you are not a Jew." He answered, "I'll be glad to eat it," and made believe he was eating but in fact did not (*Avodah Zarah* 16b-18). No doubt, in the view of this "humble" person who knows the true meaning of the Torah,⁵ Rabbi Meir who worshipped Hashem secretly is considered a gentile, since in his responsum he writes that whoever acts publicly like a gentile while secretly behaving like a Jew is a gentile.

There is also the famous story of how Rabbi Eliezer was seized by heretics, whose offense is worse than idolatry. The heretics—may Hashem cut them down—ridicule all religion and say such things as, "Believers are fools!" "Students of religion are crazy!" They deny prophecy entirely. Rabbi Eliezer was a famous scholar in the sciences. They asked him, "How can you have reached such a high level of scholarship and still believe in religion?" He answered them, appearing to have adopted their creed, whereas he really had in mind the true faith and no other.

This story is told in the Midrash (*Koheles Rabbah* 1:8) as follows:

It happened that Rabbi Eliezer was seized [by heretics] in order to convert him to heresy. The general brought him to the capital and said, "How is it that an old man like you spends his time on things like that?" He replied, "I accept the judge's words as the truth." The general thought that he meant him, whereas he was really referring to Hashem. The general then said, "Rabbi, I see you have faith in me . . ." [turning to his men he said,] "I really was wondering, how could he have been led astray by such things?" Thereupon he said [to Rabbi Eliezer,] "I pardon you. You are free to go!"

You see that Rabbi Eliezer pretended to the general that he was a heretic, although in his heart he was devoted to Hashem. Heresy is much more serious than idolatry, as has been outlined throughout the Talmud. Yet according to the writings of this "devout"

underlying idea is that even when the Jewish people (Yaakov) transgress Hashem's laws, they remain His children and will receive His blessing.

⁵The Rambam is writing this sarcastically.

individual, Rabbi Eliezer should be disqualified. In this current persecution, [our transgression is far less serious] we do not pretend that we are idol worshippers, we only declare that we believe their creed. They are well aware that we do not believe one word of it. We are saying so only to deceive the king, similar to what the prophet said, *"Yet they deceived him with their speech, lied to him with their words"* (Tehillim 78:36).

It is well known what happened to the Jewish people in the days of the evil Nebuchadnezzar. The entire population of Babylon, except Chanaiah, Mishael, and Azariah, bowed to the statue. Hashem testified about that generation, stating, *"No more shall Yaakov be shamed, no longer his face grow pale"* (Yeshayah 29:22). Even the great Torah scholars, if they were present at the time, perhaps bowed down [to the image] in Babylon. I have not come across anyone who called them wicked, gentiles, or disqualified to testify as witnesses. Neither has Hashem counted their action as the sin of idolatry, because they were forced to do it. The Sages confirm this, with reference to the time of Haman, saying, *"They performed [the act of prostrating themselves] outwardly, I will also deal with them only outwardly"* (Megillah 12a).

The author of this response is no doubt a God-fearing man; [he should take a lesson from the Almighty how to treat his people]. *"Shame on him who argues with his Maker, a potsherd with the potsherds of earth! Shall the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?'"* (Yeshayah 45:9).

It is known what happened to the Jewish people under the wicked rule of the Greeks. Harsh and evil decrees were issued. There even was a rule that no one was allowed to close the door of his house, so that he would not be alone and be able to fulfill a mitzvah. In spite of this the Sages did not consider them gentiles or evildoers, but completely righteous. They pleaded for them to Hashem and added in the special prayer of thanksgiving, *Al Hanissim* – "For the Miracles" – the phrase, "and the wicked in the hands of the **righteous**."⁶

⁶Namely that the Greeks who were wicked were delivered into the hands of the Jews who were righteous, although they had transgressed the mitzvos out of duress.

The Importance of Every Mitzvah

PURPOSE OF THIS LETTER

If not for the fact that in my introductory remarks I resolved not to quote all the things this man has written, I would show you in detail how this person made a fool of himself. He not only said things that are foolish, but even took a pen in hand and wrote them down. In response to a question, he cited material that is totally beside the point. He brings proof from the laws of *eidim zomemim* – “the refuted witnesses” (see Devarim 19:15–21), from one who curses his father or mother, the mitzvah of *tzitzis*, the prohibition of plowing with an ox and a donkey together, and the prohibition of crossbreeding one’s livestock with other species, as if the questioner had asked him to compile *Azharos*¹ for him and list all the mitzvos.

Then he says that the Moslems have an idol in Mecca and in other places. Did the questioner ask whether or not he should go on a pilgrimage to Mecca? He also states that the Madman [Mohammed] killed 24,000 Jews, as if he was asked whether Mohammed has a share in the world-to-come.

There are many more such irrelevant statements. This man really should have heeded Shlomoh’s counsel, “*Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your throat be quick to bring forth speech before God*” (Koheles 5:1). Had he paid attention to this verse, he would have realized that whoever answered or analyzed a question regarding permitted and forbidden things was interpreting God’s word. He would not have blundered the way he did.

[Although I take issue with his accusation against the Jewish people], Hashem knows and is a good witness that even if he had insulted people more than he did and had babbled more than he

¹Azharos is a list of the 613 mitzvos.

did, it would not hurt me. I am not looking for any support. On the contrary, I think, *"Let us lie down in our shame, let our disgrace cover us; for we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers (Yirmiyah 3:25).* I would have held him in great esteem and I would have said that he acted for the sake of Heaven. For, thank God, I know my worth, and I would not have made a fool of him. *"We acknowledge our wickedness, O Hashem—the iniquity of our fathers"* (Yirmiyah 14:20). But it would not have been right for me to look away and to keep quiet, since he said that any forced convert who prays receives no reward for his prayer but has, on the contrary, committed a sin [by praying]. I know that whatever is published in a book—whether it is true or false—will surely influence a wide readership. This is why so many wrong ideas circulate among people. The only way that a false idea reaches you is by way of a written book. Therefore, I was afraid that this response that turns people away from Hashem will fall into the hands of an unlearned person. He will read that he will receive no reward for praying, and he will not pray. He will reason that, in the same way, he will not be rewarded for performing any of the mitzvos. Eventually, this idea will surely lead to the creation of a new sect.

REFUTATION OF THE RABBI'S RESPONSE

I will now explain where this bombastic babbler slipped up. We read in *Tanach* a detailed account of how Achav, the son of Omri, denied God and worshiped idols, as Hashem testifies, *"Indeed there never was anyone like Achav who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of Hashem"* (Melachim I 21:25). He fasted two and a half hours and had the decree against him annulled (*Taanis* 25b), as it says, *"Then the word of Hashem came to Eliyahu the Tishbite, 'Have you seen how Achav has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring disaster in his lifetime; I will bring disaster upon his house in his son's time' "* (Melachim I 21:28–29).

Eglon, the king of Moab, oppressed Yisrael, yet he was richly rewarded by God because he paid homage to Him. He rose from his seat when Ehud said to him, *"I have a message for you from God"* (Shoftim 3:20). Hashem rewarded him and preordained that the throne of Shlomoh, which is Hashem's throne, as it says, *"And Shlomoh sat on Hashem's throne"* (Divrei Hayamim I 29:23), and the

throne of King Mashiach would come from [Eglon's] descendants. [Our Sages teach us that] Ruth the Moabite, great grandmother of King David, was Eglon's daughter (*Sanhedrin* 105b). The Rabbis noted that Hashem did not withhold his reward.

The wicked Nebuchadnezzar, who killed countless Jews and burned the House that is the footstool of God, was rewarded with forty years of royal rule like Shlomoh, because he ran four paces in order to place the name of God before the name of *Chizkiyahu* (*Sanhedrin* 96a). Again, Hashem did not withhold his reward.

The wicked Eisav was detested by Hashem, as He testifies, "*And I have hated Eisav*" (Malachi 1:3). The Sages outline his crimes as follows,

That day, he committed five sins: he murdered, worshiped idols, raped an engaged girl, denied resurrection, and rejected his birthright. He then [deceived his father] by wrapping himself in his *tallis*, entering his father Yitzchak's room and saying to him, "Father, does the law of tithing apply to salt?" Said Yitzchak [to himself], "How carefully my son observes the mitzvos!"

Even so, as the reward for the one mitzvah—that of honoring his father—which he fulfilled, Hashem granted him uninterrupted kingship until the coming of King Mashiach. Our Sages say, "David's descendant (Mashiach) will not come before Eisav receives his reward for the mitzvah of honoring one's father and mother." They derived this from the verse, "*After honor he sent me unto the nations*"² (Zechariah 2:12). Our Sages formulated this idea in the following terms, "The Holy One, Blessed is He, does not deprive any creature of the reward due to it" (*Pesachim* 118a). He always rewards everyone for the good deeds he performs and punishes everyone for his misdeed; as long as he continues to do it.

Now if these well-known heretics were richly rewarded by Hashem for the little good they did, how can Hashem not reward Jews who were forced to convert but who nevertheless perform the mitzvos secretly? Can it be that Hashem does not distinguish between one who performs a mitzvah and one who does not, or between one who serves Hashem and one who does not? This man

²Our Sages interpreted this verse as follows—after the reward given to Eisav for honoring his father will Yisrael be sent unto the nations.

says [the opposite], that when he prays he commits a sin, and he backs this up by quoting the verse, *"For my people has done a twofold wrong"* (Yirmiyah 2:13). Now we have explained his error. He defames his contemporaries, and speaks contrary to the words of the rabbis, as we mentioned. He is even maligning the Creator, stating that He punishes a person for performing mitzvos. He stated, in fact, that the prayer of any of you is considered a sin. Shlomoh had such a situation in mind when he said, *"And don't plead before the messenger that it was an error"* (Koheles 5:5).

When I realized that this matter was a disease for the eyes, I set myself to gather herbs and choice spices from the books of the ancient pharmacists with which to concoct a medicine and an eye ointment for this disease. With God's help, it will bring about a cure.³

³The Rambam, who was a famous physician, uses a pharmaceutical metaphor to introduce his exhaustive response to the question regarding forced conversion to Islam.

Discussion of Kiddush Hashem

It is useful to divide my remarks on this subject into five parts: 1. The obligation to mitzvos during times of compulsion. 2. Parameters of *Chillul Hashem*—desecration of Hashem's Name—and its punishment. 3. The status of one who gives his life *al Kiddush Hashem*—for the sanctification of Hashem's name—and of one who transgresses under duress. 4. How the present persecution differs from previous ones, and how one should act during this situation. 5. How a person should perceive himself during this persecution, may Hashem end it soon. Amen.

I: THE OBLIGATION TO MITZVOS DURING TIMES OF RELIGIOUS COMPULSION

The three prohibitions of idolatry, incest, and manslaughter have a particular stringency. Whenever a person is forced to violate any of these, he is at all times, everywhere, and under all circumstances commanded to give up his life rather than transgress. When I say, "at all times" I mean in a time of persecution or otherwise; when I say "everywhere" I mean in private or in public; when I say, "under all circumstances" I mean whether the oppressor intends to make him violate his religious beliefs or not. [In any of these situations], he must choose death.

If he is forced to transgress any other commandment, excluding the aforementioned three, he must evaluate the circumstances. If the oppressor does it for his own benefit, be it at a time of persecution or not, privately or publicly, he may violate the law and thereby save his life. This may be found in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 74b) "But Esther was [forced to sin] in public? Abaye said, 'Esther was passive.' Rava said, 'If it is for his own enjoyment it makes a

difference.' " We have a standing rule that the Halachah is decided according to Rava.

To summarize, if the oppressor is doing it for his personal benefit one should transgress and avoid being killed, even if it is in public and during a time of persecution.

If the oppressor intends to make him [violate his beliefs] and commit a sin, he must evaluate [the times]. In a time of persecution he must give up his life and not transgress, whether in private or in public. If it is not a time of persecution, he should transgress and save his life, if it is in private, but he should choose death if it is in public.

This is the relevant text in the Talmud; "When Rav Dimi [Ravin] arrived, he said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan that even if it is not a time of persecution, he may transgress and not die, only in private; in public he may not violate even a minor mitzvah, even changing the way he ties his shoes." By "in public" is meant [in the presence of] ten Jewish males.

II: PARAMETERS OF CHILLUL HASHEM AND ITS PUNISHMENT

The parameters of *Chillul Hashem* – desecration of Hashem's Name – can be divided into two categories: one that applies to [the] general [populace] and one to specific [people].

That which applies to the general populace takes two forms. The first form: When a person commits a sin out of spite, not for the pleasure or enjoyment to be derived from that act, but because he treats it lightly and disdainfully, he is thereby desecrating Hashem's Name. Hashem says concerning one who swears falsely, which is an act that brings him no pleasure or enjoyment, "*Do not swear falsely by My Name; [if you do so] you will be desecrating your God's Name*" (Vayikra 19:12). If he does it in public he is openly desecrating Hashem's Name. I explained above that "in public" means in the presence of ten Jews.

The second form: When someone consciously fails to correct his behavior to the point that people begin to talk disparagingly about him. He may not have committed a sin, but he has nonetheless desecrated Hashem's Name. When he is [being perceived as] sinning by his fellow man, a person should be as careful as he is of

sinning to his Creator, for Hashem said, “*You shall be innocent before Hashem and Yisrael*” (Bamidbar 32:22).

The Talmud (*Yoma* 86a) asks regarding this subject, [“What is meant by *Chillul Hashem*?”] Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak replied, “For example, if people say about someone, May God forgive so-and-so.” Another example cited is, “When friends are embarrassed by his reputation.”

The parameters of *Chillul Hashem* that apply to specific people also take two forms:

The first form: When a learned person does something that a person of his stature should not do, even though others may do so without compunction. Because he has a reputation of being a man of virtue, people expect more of him. [By his action] he has desecrated Hashem’s Name. Rav gave the following definition of *Chillul Hashem*, “For example, when I buy meat and do not pay right away” (*Yoma* 86a). In other words, a person of his eminence should not buy anything unless he pays immediately, at the time of purchase, although the practice [of buying on credit] is quite acceptable with the general public. Rabbi Yochanan said the following on the subject, “For example, if I walk four ells without wearing my *tefillin* and without being engrossed in Torah thoughts [it is considered a *Chillul Hashem*].” He is referring to a man of his stature. Very often we find that the Talmud draws a distinction when the person is an important personality.

The second form: When a learned man behaves in a lowly and loathsome way in his dealings with people. He receives people angrily and with contempt. He is not genial with people and does not treat them with decency and respect. Such a person has desecrated Hashem’s Name. The Sages phrased it this way, “When a person is learned but is not honest in his dealings with people and does not speak gently to people, what do people say about him? Woe is to so-and-so who studied Torah!”

If I were not concerned about being long-winded and going off on a tangent, I would explain to you how a person should behave toward others, what his actions and words should be like, and how he should receive people. Thus anyone who spoke to him or had dealings with him would speak about him only in glowing terms. I would explain the meaning of the phrases “being honest in one’s dealings with people” and “speaking gently to people.” But this would require a full-length book. So I will pick up where I left off.

Kiddush Hashem—Sanctification of Hashem's Name is the opposite of *Chillul Hashem*. When a person fulfills a mitzvah and is inspired by no other motive than his love of Hashem and the desire to serve Him, he has publicly sanctified Hashem's Name. So too, if good things are said about him, he has sanctified Hashem's Name. The Sages phrased it like this, "When a person has studied Torah and Mishnah, attended to Torah scholars and dealt gently with people, what do people say about him? 'See how pleasant is his conduct, how seemly are his deeds!' " Scripture says this about such a man, "And He said to me, 'You are My servant, Yisrael in whom I glory' " (Yeshayah 49:3). Regarding *Kiddush Hashem* a great person is also special. If a great man avoids distasteful situations he is sanctifying Hashem's Name. And so we read, "Put crooked speech away from you" (Mishlei 4:24).

Chillul Hashem is a grave sin. Both the deliberate sinner and the inadvertent sinner are punished. The Rabbis phrased it succinctly, "Both unintentional and intentional, are liable regarding desecration of the Name" (*Avos* 4:5). A man is granted a delay in punishment for all sins, but not for the desecration of Hashem's Name. The Rabbis stated, "For the desecration of Hashem's Name no credit is extended. What do we mean that no credit is extended? He is not treated as he is by the storekeeper who extends credit" (*Kiddushin* 40a). In other words, he will be required to pay for his transgression immediately. The Sages also teach that, "Whoever desecrates Hashem's Name in secret, is punished in public" (*Avos* 4:5).

This sin is more serious than any other. Neither Yom Kippur, nor suffering, nor repentance can atone for *Chillul Hashem*. This is what the Rabbis say about it, "He who is guilty of *Chillul Hashem* cannot have his sin erased by either repentance, Yom Kippur or through suffering; they all suspend punishment until death affords forgiveness, for so it says, "Then the Lord of Hosts revealed Himself to my ears: 'This iniquity shall never be forgiven you until you die' " (Yeshayah 22:14). This entire discourse refers to the person who willingly desecrates the Name of Hashem, as I shall explain.

Just as *Chillul Hashem* is a grave sin, so is *Kiddush Hashem*—the Sanctification of Hashem's Name—a great mitzvah for which you are richly rewarded. Every Jew is required to sanctify Hashem's Name. It is written in Sifra, "I am Hashem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, [and] to be a God for

you" (Vayikra 25:38), on condition that you sanctify My Name publicly. We also find in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 74b) it says, "Rabbi Ami was asked, Is a Noachide commanded to sanctify Hashem's Name?" With regard to a Jew this question was not raised; obviously it may be inferred that a Jew is indeed commanded to sanctify His Name, as it is stated, "*I must be sanctified among the Israelites*" (Vayikra 22:32).

III: THE STATUS OF ONE WHO GIVES HIS LIFE *AL KIDDUSH HASHEM* AND OF ONE WHO TRANSGRESSES UNDER DURESS

You must realize that wherever the Sages ruled that one must give up his life rather than transgress, and he does so, he has sanctified Hashem's name. If ten Jews witnessed his death he has sanctified the Name publicly. For example: *Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah*,¹ *Daniel*,² the Ten Martyrs killed by the Romans,³ the seven sons of *Channah*,⁴ and all the other Jews who gave their lives for the sanctification of the Name, may the Merciful one speedily avenge their blood. The following verse applies to them, "*Bring in My devotees, who made a covenant with Me over sacrifice*" (Tehillim 50:5). Our Rabbis related the following verse to them, "*I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by hinds of the fields*" (*Shir Hashirim* 2:7). They expounded, "*I adjure you O maidens of Jerusalem*"—the persecuted generations; "*by the gazelles*"—those who did for Me what I desired, and I did what they desired; "*by the hinds of the field*"—those who shed their blood for Me like the blood of gazelles and hinds. The following verse also applies to them: "*It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long*" (Tehillim 44:23).

A person to whom God granted the privilege to rise to the lofty level of dying *al Kiddush Hashem*—for the Sanctification of Hashem's

¹See Daniel, chapter 3. Nebuchadnezzar ordered everyone to bow down before a huge statue, but Daniel's three friends refused to do so. They were thrown into a furnace but were miraculously saved.

²Daniel who disobeyed King Darius' order and prayed to Hashem was miraculously saved from the lion's den into which he was thrown.

³The story of the ten great Tanna'im who were brutally killed by the Romans is told in the *Eileh Ezkera*, recited on Yom Kippur during Mussaf.

⁴They were killed by Antiochus, in the times of Chanukah, for refusing to worship the Greek idol.

Name, although he may not have been a Torah scholar, merits to be in the world to come, even if he was sinful as *Yerovam ben Nevat* and his colleagues. The Rabbis say of this, “ ‘No one can approach the high rank of those martyred by the government!’ Who are we referring to? We cannot say that this refers to Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues [who were martyrs of the Roman government], because surely they had other claims to eminence. It must be referring to the martyrs of Lydda.”⁵

If one did not allow himself to be killed, but under duress transgressed and remained alive, he did not do the right thing. Under duress he desecrated Hashem’s Name. However, he does not incur any of the seven penalties enumerated in the Torah, namely: the four death penalties of the human court [stoning, burning, beheading, and strangling]; premature death—*kareis*; divinely caused death; and lashes. There is not a single case in the entire Torah in which a person acting under duress is sentenced to any of these punishments, whether his transgression was minor or major. Only a willful sinner is punished, not one who was forced. As it says, “*However, if a person commits [an act of idolatry] high-handedly, whether he is a native born or a proselyte, he is blaspheming Hashem, and that person shall be cut off [spiritually] from among his people*” (Bamidbar 15:30). The Talmud is full of statements to the effect that a person acting under duress is not guilty. According to the Torah, “. . . *this case*⁶ is no different from the case where a man rises up against his neighbor and murders him” (Devarim 22:26). We often read in the Talmud, “According to the Torah, a person who acted under duress, is exempt from punishment.” He is not characterized as a sinner or a wicked man, and he is not disqualified [by this] from serving as a witness. Only if he [willfully] committed a sin that disqualifies him from serving as a witness. [All that can be said is that] he did not fulfill the mitzvah of *Kiddush Hashem*, but under no circumstances can he be considered as having willfully desecrated Hashem’s Name.

⁵Two brothers, Lulianus and Pappus, who took upon themselves the guilt for the death of the Emperor’s daughter, in order to save the entire nation. See Taanis 18b.

⁶The Torah is relating the punishment for one who forcibly cohabits with a betrothed girl. The Torah specifically excludes the girl from punishment, although technically she was involved in adultery.

Whoever says or thinks that a person should be sentenced to death because he violated a law of which the Sages said that he should give up his life rather than transgress, is completely wrong. It simply is not so, as I will explain. What is meant is that it is a mitzvah to offer his life, but if he did not, he is not liable to the death penalty. And even if he was forced to worship idols he is not liable to *kareis* (be cut off spiritually). He certainly is not executed by order of the court. This principle is clearly stated in *Toras Kohanim*: "Hashem says [concerning a man who gives any of his children to Molech,⁷] *"I will direct My anger against that person"* (Vayikra 20:5). Our Sages comment, "but not if he was forced, acted unwittingly, or was misled." It is clear then that if he was forced or misled he is not liable. We are speaking about a prohibition, that had it been done intentionally has the stringency of *kareis*. Certainly, if he was forced to commit sins that when done intentionally are punishable by lashes, he is not at all liable. The prohibition of *Chillul Hashem* is a negative commandment, [that is not liable to *kareis*]. As it is stated, *"Do not desecrate My holy Name"* (Vayikra 22:32). [Surely one who transgresses under duress is not liable.]

It is a known fact that making a false oath is a desecration of Hashem's Name. As it says, *"Do not swear falsely by My Name; [if you do], you will be desecrating your God's Name. I am Hashem"* (Vayikra 19:12). Still, the Mishnah reads, "One is allowed to vow to murderers, robbers and tax-collectors that what he has is *terumah*,⁸ [thereby saving his produce]. Beis Shammai states that one may only use the form of a *neder* (vow). Beis Hillel says that one may also use the formula of *shevuah* (oath)" (Nedarim 3:4).

These things are clearly spelled out. There is no need to bring any proofs to support them; how can anyone say that the law regarding a person who acted under duress and one who acted voluntarily is the same? Our Sages ruled in many cases, "Let him transgress and not give up his life." Now this man [who wrote this response] considers himself to be more worthy than the Rabbis and more scrupulous in the observance of the mitzvos. He openly declares his willingness to surrender his life in all cases and thinks that he is sanctifying Hashem's Name. However, if he would indeed act this way [and surrender his life in every instance] he would

⁷A form of idol worship.

⁸Produce permitted only to a Kohain.

be a sinful and rebellious individual. He would bear guilt for his soul, for Hashem said, *"Keep My decrees and laws, since by keeping them a person will live"* (Vayikra 18:5) – and not die (Sanhedrin 74a).

IV: HOW THIS PERSECUTION DIFFERS FROM PREVIOUS ONES AND HOW ONE SHOULD ACT DURING THE PRESENT SITUATION

You have to realize that in all the persecutions that occurred in the time of the Sages, they were ordered to violate mitzvos and to perform [sinful] acts, as we are told in the Talmud: They were forbidden to study Torah and to circumcise their sons. They were ordered to have intercourse with their wives when they were ritually unclean. But in the present persecution they are not required to do any forbidden action, only to say something. If a person wishes to fulfill the 613 commandments of the Torah in secret he can do so. He is not guilty of anything unless he happens to desecrate the Shabbos without being forced to do so. This oppressive regime does not force anyone to do any prohibited act, just to make an oral affirmation [of faith]. They know very well that we do not mean what we say, and that the person making the affirmation is only doing so to escape the king's wrath and to satisfy him with a recitation of meaningless incantations.

If anyone asks me whether he should offer his life or make this acknowledgement, I tell him to acknowledge and not choose death. However if one died a martyr's death rather than affirm the divine mission of "that man" [Mohammed], we can say that he acted righteously. He will receive an abundant reward from Hashem. His position will be in the loftiest levels, for he has given his life for the sanctity of Hashem. However, one should not stay in the country under the rule of that king. [Until he is able to leave], he should stay home, do his work secretly and go out only if it is absolutely essential.

There has never been a persecution as unusual as this, where people are only compelled to say something. Our Rabbis ruled that a person should choose death and not transgress. We cannot infer that they meant speech that does not involve action. One must

submit to martyrdom only when he is forced to do something that he is forbidden to do.

A person who is caught in this persecution should conduct himself along the following lines: Let him set his sights on observing as many of the mitzvos as he can. If he transgressed often or desecrated the Shabbos, he should still not carry what he is not allowed to carry.⁹ He should not say to himself, "The transgressions I have made are more grave than [the carrying on Shabbos] from which I am abstaining now." Let him be as careful about observing the mitzvos as he can.

A person must be aware of this fundamental Torah principle. Yеровam ben Nevat and others like him are punished for [the grievous sin of] making the calves as well as for disregarding the [comparatively minor] law of *eiruv tavshilin*¹⁰ and similar laws. Don't say that to him applies the rule of "he who has committed two offenses must be held answerable for the more severe one only" (*Gittin* 52b). This principle applies only to punishments meted out by man in this world. Hashem metes out punishment for minor and serious sins, and He rewards people for everything they do. A person should be aware that he is held accountable for every transgression he committed. He is rewarded for every mitzvah he performed. Things are not the way people think.

The recommendation I followed myself, and the advice I want to give to all my friends and anyone that consults me, is to leave those places and to go to where we can practice our religion and fulfill the Torah without compulsion and fear. Let him leave his family and his possessions. The Law of Hashem that He has given us as a heritage is very great. Our commitment to it takes precedence to material values. All thinkers scorn material wealth, which is transitory, but the fear of Hashem endures.

Let us say, there were two Jewish cities, one superior to the other in its deeds and conduct, more meticulous with mitzvos and more dedicated to their observance. A God-fearing person is required to leave the city where the actions are not quite proper and

⁹On Shabbos it is forbidden to carry an object from a private domain into a public domain, or vice versa, or to carry an object four ells in a public domain.

¹⁰*Eiruv tavshilin*, the law of "combination of dishes." When a *Yom Tov* falls on Friday, it is forbidden to cook or bake for Shabbos unless an *eiruv tavshilin* is performed.

move to the better city. Our Sages admonished us in this regard, stating, "You should not live in a city where there are fewer than ten righteous residents." They find support for this in the verse, [where Abraham pleads with Hashem to spare the city of Sodom, saying,] *"Suppose there are ten [righteous people] found there?"* And He answered, *"I will not destroy for the sake of the ten"* (Bereishis 18:32). This is what one should do when both cities are Jewish. Certainly, if a Jew lives in a place inhabited by gentiles, he must leave it and go to a more favorable place. He must make every effort to do so, although he may place himself in jeopardy. He must escape that bad place where he cannot practice his religion properly, and set out until he arrives at a decent place.

The prophets have postulated that he who lives among heretics is considered one of them. They derived it from [the words of King David who said, when he was banished from Eretz Yisrael], *"For they have driven me out today, so that I cannot have a share in Hashem's possession, rather I am told, 'Go and worship other gods'"* (Shmuel I 26:19). You see that [David] equates his dwelling among gentiles with the worship of other gods. In the same vein, David says, *"O Lord, You know I hate those who hate You and loathe Your adversaries"* (Tehillim 139:21), and also, *"I am a companion to all who fear You, to those who keep Your precepts"* (Tehillim 119:63). Similarly, we see that our father Abraham despised his family and his home town. He ran for his life to escape from the creed of the heretics.

He should make an effort to leave the nonbelievers' environment when they do not force him to follow in their ways. But when they coerce him to transgress even one of the mitzvos, he is forbidden to remain in that place. He must leave and abandon everything he owns, travel day and night, until he finds a spot where he can practice his religion. There is a big, wide world out there!

The excuse of the person who claims that he has to take care of his family and his household really does not hold water. *"A brother cannot redeem a man or pay his ransom to God"* (Tehillim 49:8). In my opinion, it is not right to make this claim to avoid the obligation. He should emigrate to a decent place, and under no circumstances continue to stay in the land of persecution. Whoever remains there is a transgressor and desecrates Hashem's Name, and is almost an intentional sinner.

There are those who delude themselves into believing that they should remain where they are until King Mashiach comes to

the lands of the Maghreb. Then they will go to Jerusalem. I do not know how they will disentangle themselves from the present persecution. They are transgressors, and they cause others to sin. The prophet Yirmiyah had people like them in mind when he said, *"They offer healing offhand for the wounds of My people, saying, 'all is well, all is well' "* (Yirmiyah 6:14). There is no dependable set time for the coming of Mashiach. One does not know if he is coming soon or in the distant future. The obligation of keeping the mitzvos is not dependent on the coming of Mashiach. We are required to engross ourselves in Torah and mitzvos. We must strive to achieve perfection in both of them. Then, if Hashem grants us, our children or grandchildren the privilege to witness the coming of Mashiach, so much the better. If he does not come we have not lost anything. On the contrary, we have gained by doing what we had to do.

A person may be in a place where he sees Torah study coming to an end, the Jewish population declining and gradually disappearing, and he himself unable to practice his religion. He says, "I am going to stay here until Mashiach comes. Then I will be extricated from this predicament." Such a person is guilty of wickedness, destructive callousness, and of wiping out the Jewish faith and ideology. That is my opinion, and Hashem knows the truth.

V: HOW A PERSON SHOULD PERCEIVE HIMSELF DURING THIS PERSECUTION

A person may be unable to fulfill the aforementioned advice [to leave the land of persecution], either because of his fondness for his [native] country or because of his fear of the dangers of a sea voyage. He stays where he is. He, then, must regard himself as desecrating Hashem's Name, not quite deliberately, but almost so. He must consider himself as being scolded by God and punished for his bad deeds. At the same time, he should realize that if he performs a mitzvah, the Holy One, Blessed is He, will give him a two-fold reward. He did the mitzvah for the sake of Heaven, and not to impress others or to be regarded as an observant Jew. In addition, a person's reward for performing a mitzvah knowing that if caught, he will lose his life and all his possessions, is much greater than that of a person who fulfills a mitzvah without fear. The Torah, referring to a time like the present, [when observance of mitzvos is

done for the sake of heaven and despite the fact that one's life is in danger], says: *"If only you seek Him with all your heart and soul"* (Devarim 4:29). Nevertheless, you should not take your mind off your plans to leave the provinces that Hashem is angry with, and do your utmost [to carry them out].

It is not right to shun and despise people who desecrate the Shabbos. Rather, you should reach out to them and encourage them to fulfill the mitzvos. The Rabbis ruled that a sinner who willfully transgressed should be welcomed to the synagogue and not humiliated. They based their pronouncement on Shlomoh's advice: *"A thief should not be despised for stealing to appease his hunger"* (Mishlei 6:30). This means, do not despise sinners in Yisrael when they come secretly to "steal" mitzvos.

Ever since we were banished from our land, persecutions have been our fate, as it says, *"From our youth it (the persecution) raised us as a father and from our mother's womb it has directed us"* (Iyov 31:18). It also says in many places in the Talmud, "a persecution is likely to pass" (Kesuvos 3b). May Hashem put an end to this one.

"In those days and at that time—declares Hashem—the iniquity of Yisrael shall be sought, and there shall be none; the sins of Yehudah, and none shall be found; for I will pardon those I allow to survive" (Yirmiyah 50:12). Let the prophecy be fulfilled speedily in our days. May it be His will. Amen.